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RECOLLECTIONS  
OF THE  
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AND  
INCIDENTS OF THE FIGHTS.



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BY  
LE G. B. CANNON,

LATE

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- Charles H. Cajor

At the request of Hon. G. V. Fox, late Assistant Secretary of the Navy, these recollections were hastily prepared from memory, and without being able to refer to notes taken immediately after the events related.

These notes were written  
simply to aid Capt Fox in  
writing the history of the  
"Monitor" & not intended  
for publication, but  
accidentally got into print

CHC

RECOLLECTIONS  
OF THE  
IRON CLADS,  
MONITOR AND MERRIMACK  
AND  
INCIDENTS OF THE FIGHTS.

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The last of December, 1861, a secret communication was made to Major-Gen. Wool, commanding the Department of Virginia, with head-quarters at Fort Monroe, by a mechanic working in the Portsmouth Navy Yard, through a person who had come into our lines, by flag of truce, giving a general description of an ironclad fitting out by the rebels, the vessel being the old U. S. frigate "Merrimack;" the informer stated, that she had been razed, her spars removed, and was being covered with an iron-plated roofing.

About four or five weeks after (somewhere about the 10th or 15th of February), the same mechanic managed to communicate again with Gen. Wool, giving a detailed description of the vessel. This last communication stated that her armor was completed, that she was out of dock, and that she was pierced for ten guns (four on each broadside and one bow and stern rifle-gun); that as soon as she had received her crew and the tide served, she would go out and attack the Cumberland and Congress (lying off Newport News and blockading the mouth of the James River), that Gen. Magruder, in command of the Rebel forces on the Peninsula, with head-quarters at

Yorktown, would simultaneously attack Gen. Mansfield's command at Newport News.

Gen. Wool, relying on the loyalty of the informer, and the accuracy of his statements, and being deficient in field artillery, immediately sent the writer, as "bearer of despatches," with this information to the Secretary of War, and earnestly urged that he be furnished with two more field batteries.

The bearer found Secretary Stanton prostrated by severe illness, and at his bedside read the despatch, and explained to him the situation and condition of our command. The Secretary was so deeply impressed by this despatch that he sent the bearer with Assistant-Secretary Watson to the President. The President deemed the information of sufficient importance to detain the bearer to meet a Cabinet Council, to be held within an hour; at that Council all the Cabinet were present, including the Secretary and Assistant-Secretary of the Navy.

The Government, therefore, was not taken by surprise when the Merrimack appeared, though they were alarmingly startled by her first day's success, and greatly exaggerated her ability as a cruiser, as she had proved herself that day invincible against wooden vessels and their armament.

The command at Fort Monroe being in winter quarters was naturally more interested in the active operations of the Navy in the waters of Virginia, and in the presence of vessels of war representing European nations. Flags of truce were frequent between Norfolk and Fort Monroe, and foreign officers were permitted to pass and repass between the hostile forces. The officers of two French corvettes, at anchor off the Fort, availed of this privilege very often, and our staff officers, on their return from such visits, made efforts to obtain information as to the condition of affairs at Norfolk, but without any measures of success. On Friday, March 7th, our flag of truce brought over three or four of these French officers. The next morning, Saturday, our signal officer's report to head-quarters noted that the French corvettes were "steaming up," and as

no notice had been sent the day previous that they were going to sea (to entitle them to a salute), the fact excited a suspicion that the Merrimack was coming out, and the Frenchmen, knowing it, were prepared to move, as they were at anchor in the line of fire.

Gen. Mansfield commanding at Newport News, was telegraphed to keep a sharp look-out.

About noon, the Merrimack was sighted coming out of the Elizabeth River, and steaming up the James River to Newport News. The Minnesota and Roanoke, screws, and the St. Lawrence, sailing frigate, got immediately under weigh, but both the former took the ground about two miles from Newport News, and could only engage the Merrimack at long range. The two latter vessels, after the loss of the Cumberland and Congress, returned to their anchorage below the Fort, the Minnesota remaining hard aground.

Anticipating an attack by Gen. Magruder on Newport News, Gen. Wool ordered up the troops at Camp Hamilton to the support of Gen. Mansfield. Rebel forces appeared and threatened an attack, but retired on the appearance of the supports. Capt. Catesby R. Jones, in his article in the Southern Magazine, December, 1874, gives the reasons why Magruder failed to make the attack with the land forces, showing, conclusively, that the information received by Gen. Wool, in February, and sent to the War Office, was accurate in all particulars.

The Cumberland was at anchor about 1,000 feet from the shore, under the guns of a battery on the Bluff at Newport News. (This battery mounted 5 or 6 guns, two of which were 6-inch rifles, and the others 8-inch Rodmans.) The Congress being at anchor about the same distance below the Cumberland.

The Merrimack, in passing up, fired a broadside into the Congress, and continued on to attack the Cumberland. After firing a few shots, she ran into her, striking her near the bow with her iron ram, and forcing in her planking and timbers be-

low the water line, from the effect of which, she commenced sinking rapidly; but although ~~commanded~~ <sup>summoned</sup> to surrender, her heroic commander, Morris, refused, and kept up an active fire until the last, firing his guns till she went down with her flag flying at the peak. The Congress had in the meanwhile slipped her cable and drifted ashore; when the Merrimack, taking a raking position, attacked her with terrible effect, sweeping her decks and setting her on fire. Her commander, Lieut. Smith, was killed, and to continue so hopeless a fight was simply madness. Her flag was struck, and a prize-crew thrown on board from a Rebel gun boat.

It is proper to explain, here, that the battery on the Bluff kept up a continuous fire on the Merrimack, and from its elevation—about 30 feet above the water—and at the short range, the fire was almost perpendicular to the sloping roof of the Merrimack, but the effect of this battery's shot was not damaging. Gen. Mansfield, also, detailed a force of infantry to the beach, who kept up a sharp fire on the ports of the Merrimack. A section of artillery was also engaged in the fight, and, on the Congress being boarded by a prize crew, opened on the prize with a raking fire of grape, which obliged the prize-crew to abandon her. Then it was that the Merrimack re-opened fire on the Congress, a circumstance which has led to no little controversy, but which finds its justification in the precedent of Nelson, at Copenhagen. The Merrimack, after the loss of the Cumberland, opened fire on the shore battery and camp at Newport News, without much effect, although one of her shells demolished Gen. Mansfield's head-quarters, half burying the General under the *debris*. Two of her unexploded shells were, after the fight, picked up, one of which is in Washington and the other in possession of the writer.

During the engagement, the Merrimack was joined by two armed steamers from up the James River, and all these vessels turned their next attention to the Minnesota, hopelessly aground about two miles below. The fire of the Minnesota kept off the

wooden vessels, but the Merrimack continued firing on her at about a mile range, until dark, but without inflicting much damage.

The whole aspect at head-quarters was gloomy. The garrison was entirely composed of infantry volunteers, the armament was old-fashioned and of small calibre, and the experience of that day's fight showed that practically our batteries were as useless as musket-balls against the iron-clad. Our magazines were shot-proof only from the sea side; the parade in the fort was filled with quarter-master and commissary stores, with slight protection from the weather; the barracks were of wood; there ~~are~~ <sup>was</sup> no means of extinguishing fire; and outside the fort, an immense quantity of naval ammunition, for the coast fleets, all utterly unprotected, and with no means of removal to meet the emergency.

The success of the Merrimack gave her the control of the Roads, and if she could get sufficient elevation to her guns, she had the ability to shell and destroy the vast stores in and about the fort, without the least power on our part to resist her.

Capt. Van. Brunt, commanding the Minnesota, through Lieut. Grafton, 1st officer, reported, at head-quarters, the result of their engagement, and, as all efforts to get her afloat had failed, it was proposed to land a part of her crew (to save unnecessary slaughter), fight her to the last, and in an emergency blow her up. The surviving officers and crews of the Cumberland and Congress had been brought into the fort, and volunteered to serve our guns. The garrison was, therefore, reduced to about eight hundred men, the magazines from the bay side banked up with earth from the parade, and made secure, and every precaution taken to stand a shelling.

About 9 o'clock, p. m., Port Captain Milward reported at head-quarters that the iron-clad Monitor had been signaled entering the Roads, and was dropping anchor at the Horse-shoe.

Gen. Wool ordered the writer to take an armed tug, and report to her commander the result of the day's conflict and the perilous condition of the Minnesota.

I boarded her about 10.30 p. m., finding the news anticipated from the fleet, and Capt. Worden, with an overworked crew from her perilous passage, was about lifting anchor to go up to the Minnesota. We remained alongside until she got under way, with her guns shotted and her men at quarters. She reached the Minnesota about one o'clock, without seeing the Merrimack. Thus closed to us a sadly eventful day.

Sunday morning (9th March) opened with a low fog hanging over the waters; about 7 o'clock, a column of black smoke was visible off Sewel's Point, and soon after the top of the smoke-stack of the Merrimack appeared; the fog dissipated, and a calm, cloudless, warm Sunday morning broke upon us; not a breath of air disturbed the waters, and the singular transparency of the atmosphere rendered objects distinct for a great distance from our elevation on the ramparts.

Immediately after the clearing of the fog the Rebel fleet, consisting of the Merrimack, two side-wheel steamers, and two gunboats (screws), got under weigh, standing up the river and opened fire on the Minnesota, the latter briskly returning the fire. The Monitor stood out under the bow of the Minnesota and bore down on the Merrimack, opening her battery at about half mile range. The Rebel wooden consorts soon determined that it was an entertainment they were not invited to, and took refuge under their shore batteries. Thus commenced this grand naval duel, witnessed by more than 40,000 armed men on either shore, no one of whom was insensible to the results of this mighty combat. The engagement between the iron-clads continued at close quarters for about two hours, broadsides being frequently exchanged, as appeared to the observer, with the vessels almost in contact, and without advantage to either. After a close and rapid coun-

tering, the vessels separated, the Monitor steaming up the river toward the Minnesota and followed for a short distance by the Merrimack; but soon stopped and was approached by two of ~~the~~ consorts, firing, meanwhile, having been suspended. The Monitor remained out of action a half an hour or more. With our glasses we could see men on her deck about the pilot house, and, as afterwards appeared, she had received a shot which broke one of the wrought iron logs of the pilot house, the same shot wounding Capt. Worden; this injury was the cause of her retiring from action, but it was soon ascertained not to be vital, and she again bore down on the Merrimack. The latter, it appeared, had got aground, but floated before the Monitor came up with her. The Monitor re-engaged and forced the fight, by lying athwart the stern of the Merrimack, delivering her fire rapidly and with telling effect, as with our glasses we could see that the Merrimack was settling by the stern. The Merrimack, unable to shake her off or to stand the pounding, commenced the retreat to Norfolk; then went up the excited exclamation of the officers on the ramparts, "She is sinking!" and the apostrophe of the late Captain Talmadge, (our chief quartermaster), "she sticks to her like a king-bird to a hawk," quaintly illustrating the intrepid action of the little two-gun raft, as she out-fought a champion which 24 hours before convulsed the nation and astonished the world by her achievements. The Monitor pursued the Merrimack until she was brought under the fire of the rebel batteries, and then retired with her purpose accomplished.

At the invitation of Capt. Fox, Assistant Secretary I boarded the Monitor before her decks were cleared. The ship's company were mustered, and the Secretary made a brief and forcible address to the officers and crew, thanking them, in the name of the Department, for their gallantry and success, and enquiring if any special act of gallantry had been exhibited. Lieut. Green replied that all had done their duty, but if any one was conspicuous it was the quarter-master, who had



steered the ship and never left the wheel during the engagement, and was by Worden's side when he was wounded. The Secretary ordered the man to step forward, complimented him on his steadiness and courage, and asked if he would like promotion. This young fellow was a Dane, singularly modest, and so overcome by the recognition that he could not find his voice to reply. Lieut. Green, seeing his embarrassment repeated the Secretary's question, when aside and in a low voice he said something which Lieut. Green repeated: "He says, Sir, he would like the Master to give him a paper," which, interpreted, means that he would like a written acknowledgement that he had done his duty. The Secretary replied, "Yes, my lad, you shall have the paper, and you are a boatswain."

The Secretary received a verbal report from Lieut. Green of the fight, and his impression as to the injury inflicted on the Merrimack, stating that the Monitor was ready to go into action again, excepting only strengthening the pilot house. It was Lieut. Green's opinion that the Monitor's charges and shot did not penetrate the armor] of the Merrimack, and he asked if he should increase the charge and use the wrought iron shot, in case she came out again. The Secretary replied, "You know Commodore Dahlgren has limited the service charge of the guns, and such are the orders of the Department; but if I was fighting a ship and found my ammunition ineffective, and had something better, I should try it in the emergency."

Thus closed the 8th of March, 1862, with a disaster of one day changed into a success which assured us a control of our waters to the end of the contest.

The following day, I went up to Washington as a bearer of despatches with the Secretary. His estimate of the fight was, that it had been nearly equal, but had not the Merrimack retreated, the Monitor would have sunk or captured her, and that the Monitor must be held to act strictly on the defensive until we had more of the same machines.

Burlington, Vt., Oct. 22, 1875.













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